

Training Women Ushers for the Theater

IT was between matinee and night. The house was dark except for a glimmer or two of red at the exits and from the little hallway that led into the box office. A "T" light was burning on the stage with the curtain up where some electricians were working. Here and there a slender form dressed in gray which rendered her a part of the shadows scurried between the rows of seats and treble voices called to one another across the theater.

"Got your books, May? I've a theme in Lit to do. What's your trouble?"

"Same old example in Trig; been working on it for three mats and haven't got there yet."

"I'll see if I remember it; bring your books up to the rest room."

In that room a dozen young girls soon gathered, each carrying a bundle of school books. Earlier in the afternoon they had been leading an audience down to the seats and saying in a soft voice:

"Here are your checks, sir. Do you care for a program?"

Who are they? To explain in a few words, they are the graduates of a School of Ushers inaugurated in the present season and carried on in the Norah Bayes Theater under the direction of Miss Duffy. Whether you call her preceptress—a title that would make her laugh—or by any other name, she is a past mistress of the art of ushering. For fifteen years she has opened every new theater for her enterprising employers, who are indefatigable theater builders. It is she who in every case has selected the corps of ushers for a new house.

Not so long ago women ushers in the theater would have created more or less amazement, but the world moves, and it has moved so fast and so far since women were first tried in this capacity in New York that now they are controlling the field. They were not, however, superlatively successful at first; they made mistakes, put people in the wrong seats and occasionally argued with the check holders, who knew the house better than they did. The pioneer ushers, too, liked to stand at the head of the aisles and relate to an incredulous companion something like this:

"An' says he to me, 'Come on along to supper after the show, girlie. Ain't you hungry? You can trust me,' says he, 'for I'm old enough to be your father.' An' says I to him, 'Oh, you, go on!'"

Although the other girl always walked away when these confidences got so thick, still the couple waiting to be escorted to their seats had some reason to be annoyed.

The Super-Usheress Enters.

It soon became plain that if women ushers were to keep the field a new kind would have to be selected and they must be taught. The idea of a school was put up to Miss Duffy, who is a nice looking, smiling, well dressed Irish woman with good manners and a good heart, and what she said in favor of it is worth repeating since the school has proved a complete success.

"The trouble we have had with girl ushers has never been very serious, but under the old hit or miss plan of selecting them there were many annoyances. These nearly in every case arose from ignorance; the girls did not know their business and nobody took the trouble to teach it, or even to explain.

"In the school all the points are carefully explained and what a girl is to do and what not to do is literally taught. She can't plead ignorance any longer.

"A practical knowledge of a theater's seating is the simplest part to acquire. How to behave involves questions that take a little more time. Politeness is demanded as a matter of course, but we seek to teach something a little beyond chill politeness; we aim to instruct our girls to feel and show true consideration. And we want her to have this without any expectation of a 'tip.'

"In fact, the school tries to impress the usher that to take a present for doing what she is hired to do is, to say the least, undignified. We make this plain to her

and afterward leave the matter to her own judgment. We don't discharge a girl because she accepts a small gratuity for doing a favor to one in the audience whom she has shown to a seat. For instance, a man may ask for an extra program and she goes and gets it for him, or the lady with him may want a glass of water when the water carrier is nowhere in the vicinity. The first thought he has is to ask the usher to supply it, and if she can do so without interference with her regular duties and he pays her for the kindness it's nobody's business but theirs.

"But let her be found taking fifty cents or a dollar from a man who has bought a dollar seat and wishes to bribe his way into a \$2.50 seat, and she's fired straight-away."

What the Ushers Are Paid.

It must be a temptation to a girl usher to break this ironclad rule now and then, for she isn't paid extravagantly. She gets a dollar for every performance where she serves. With six evenings and two matinees she earns \$8. A so-called director, who has charge of a number of companions in the orchestra or gallery, is paid twenty-five cents more for each performance, and the head usher, in charge of them all, receives for each one a dollar and a half. Unless a girl is satisfied to eat bran three times a day she can't live on that.

Recognizing this axiom of economics when the School for Ushers was started, an effort was made to break away from the conventional sources and find a new lot of girls who would do the work well but to whom it would not be a livelihood but an avocation, bringing in what may be called, for a lack of a better term and however much it might be needed, "pin money." This new field proved on experiment to be wide and fertile. There are girls who live at home but to whom the theater is a passion, so much a passion that to see the same pieces over and over again would not bore them to tears.

Another field explored was that of the schools and colleges for women, and it was from this that the school was mainly recruited. A mere hint was all that had to be given to cull hundreds of the school flowers that grow in the vast educational garden of New York. Applicants came by dozens from the neighborhood of 116th street and Broadway and from much further off. College girls, high school girls, girls temporarily in New York studying music and art, girls from villages in New Jersey and Long Island, in bunches they came to get the training of the usher school and later, if they "made good," a post as usher.

The out of town girls studying in New York and the college girls who had no afternoon lectures to attend proved to be the precise material that the school wished to get hold of to mould into the necessary form. All of them had unoccupied time, few of them but could do with some extra money, and when the one mooted point was met by circumstance everybody concerned was happy. This point is that attendance at the theater meant interference with their study hours. When it came before Miss Duffy she rose to it like a trout to a fly.

"We'll have a rest-room," said she right off the reel (which is a correct expression to follow the trout and fly simile), "and that rest room may be used as a study room."

Thus it has come about that in all the theaters which employ girl ushers strict study hours are kept by the young women, and it is said, but not by me, that their marks in the various institutions of learning are higher than they used to be before their plunge into theatrical life.

Many Girls Eager for the Work.

The girl ushers are numerous. In the first session of the school 175 were instructed, and a fair number of these got immediate employment. They like the work and they like the costume—a pretty gown of gray, with gray stockings and suede shoes. In caring for their appearance the girls as a rule take great pains, and when things wear out (for the outfit provided is expected to last for a season) they renew the items themselves. There are now on Miss Duffy's waiting list for the next session of the usher school, which opens after the Christmas holidays, over 200 names from New York and 50 from Brooklyn.

What are the qualities that make for success in this primrose path of the theater? Several of them are obvious enough, but the main one is ability to keep one's head and command a difficult situation. While this description of what sometimes has to be in an usher's makeup may seem to be exaggerated, it is not the less true that there is always a possibility of a

flapper, but the happy mean. No fat girl need apply.

"We do not draw hard and fast lines in trying to find what we want," said Miss Duffy; "ordinary attractiveness, such as youth almost always presents, is quite sufficient to give an applicant a fair chance, and when in the school she exhibits adaptability with common sense behind it



Miss Lillian Duffy, who, as the head of a school of ushers, is the only representative of her profession in this country. For fifteen years she has opened every new theater for her employers.

happening in a theater that the wise usher, male or female, can keep from growing into a scandal. Womanly wit safeguards such situations.

Good looks (but not beauty), affability and neatness figure in the list of desirable attributes, and the latter two are held to be essentials. A girl light of tread as Camilla, a girl as considerate and gentle as Cordelia, a girl temperate and wise as Portia—these are the ideal standards of the school, which, it need scarcely be explained to one who knows poor human nature, are seldom reached. In figure the ideal girl usher is neither gigantic nor a

she is pretty sure to get a place as usher. I think the young women who are in New York to study something or other offer these qualities to a satisfactory extent. But it would not be true to say that we favor the schools and exclude other than scholars. We take the girls who will be apt to do the work well, wherever they come from. It is nice, though, that while getting the service we want we are helping the girls also. But don't run away with the thought that the School for Ushers is a philanthropy. It isn't. It's a good thing, though and—to be foolishly original—I may say that it fills a long felt want."

Our Geographic Names

MOST of the States of the Mississippi Valley, besides countless rivers and lakes in all parts of the country, bear Indian names, but a small number only of the towns which are the work of the whites have adopted names borrowed from the aborigines. Not one in ten of the one hundred and fifty-odd large cities has an Indian name, and among those which have it is usually a case of adoption from some neighboring lake or stream.

The explorers and early settlers also have left their racial marks. Up the Hudson and Mohawk the trail of the Dutchman is definitely established. The French influence in northern New York and Vermont and along the line of the great lakes

shows itself in many familiar names. Mississippi has no "saints" in its gazetteer, whereas across the river, Louisiana, by nine parishes and twoscore towns, rivers and lakes, thus perpetuates the religious ideas of its early settlers. Kentucky and Tennessee show the vocabulary of the hunter and trapper; Montana and Idaho that of the miner. All the region acquired from Mexico, particularly southern California, keeps alive in its place-names the memory of its Spanish explorers and settlers. While there are Indian names on the Pacific coast, it is a curious fact that these are few, relatively speaking, in comparison with the rest of the country. North of the Spanish belt capes and towns often reflect the loyalty of early settlers to the older States of the Union.